

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This chapter contains a description of the environmental consequences that would result from the alternative concepts described in this feasibility study. The alternatives are conceptual and do not include any development activities or any specific federal actions. Therefore, the potential impacts are addressed conceptually.

IMPACTS OF ALTERNATIVE 1

The designation of routes from the Rio Grande to Natchitoches, Louisiana, as the national historic trail called El Camino Real de los Tejas would help ensure the protection and interpretation of the trail in a consistent and coordinated manner. Present and future generations would benefit from the protection of El Camino Real sites and segments. The focus on overall interpretive themes would enable a wide range of the public to appreciate and understand the evolving significance and importance of El Camino Real de los Tejas over time.

With designation as a national historic trail, the continuum of history would be interpreted. The complexity of history would be addressed through interpretation of the evolving routes. Interpretation would have the flexibility to emphasize different aspects of the interpretive story in order to focus on particular events, audiences, or places. Some public support could be lost if public interest groups disagreed with the interpretive focus.

Cultural and Natural Resources

The designation of El Camino Real de los Tejas as a national historic trail would encourage additional protection of resources by promoting public interests; encouraging grassroots management, study, and research regarding the significance of sites and segments; and providing for public use (where appropriate). The protection of resources also would be stimulated through technical assistance for preservation, coordination, and potential funding. The resources on federal lands would receive increased protection, and designation would lead to additional mechanisms, incentives, and opportunities to protect resources on nonfederal lands.

The designation of this route as a national historic trail also would encourage increased awareness and recognition by landowners, managers, and the public; this would help to ensure greater protection of resources. People might become more familiar and connected to their cultural heritage and therefore might be more likely to participate in protecting the resources.

Designation as proposed in alternative 1 would help to meet the needs of visitors along El Camino Real and promote the maintenance of a high-quality experience. Interpretive programs would give visitors the opportunity to learn about the significant role the trail played in the development of the Southwest and Mexico, as well as the importance of local historic sites. Designating an auto-tour route would allow visitors to follow the approximate route of the trail on adjacent highways and to find opportunities to experience actual trail resources. Programs, facilities, and recreational opportunities would be designed and structured to provide varying

levels of information about El Camino Real for visitors seeking a wide range of information about the history of the trail.

The designation of the trail would result in increased visitation. With proper management, such an increase would not be likely to cause adverse impacts on trail resources. However, if visitor facilities and visitor opportunities were expanded without sound planning and effective coordination there would be a potential for both natural and cultural resources to be adversely affected. Vegetation, wildlife, air and water quality, woodlands, soils, threatened and endangered species, critical habitat, floodplains, wetlands, prime farmlands, and historic and archeological resources could be negatively affected by development and visitors. If any developments were considered or proposed for these resource areas, further analysis would be done on a site-specific basis in consultation with affected parties to mitigate any impacts.

The availability of information about trail-related resources would increase the probability that sites could be vandalized and destroyed. Adverse impacts would be avoided through proper site selection, proper design, management of visitor use, law enforcement, site stewardship programs, and consultation with state historic preservation offices and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Designation and subsequent certification as a national historic trail would provide the opportunity for landowners and local governments to receive technical assistance in preserving and protecting their resources. This would help avert impacts from development and visitors on trail resources on nonfederal lands. Public access to sites would depend on agreements with partners and landowners.

Socioeconomic Environment

The designation of El Camino de los Tejas as a national historic trail probably would lead to increases in visitation and tourism revenues. These increases would not be significant on a regional and statewide scale. Tourism could increase in local communities along the trail corridor. Other federal, state, local, and private entities would benefit from the overall coordination of activities to preserve and protect trail-related resources, to interpret the trail, and to provide consistent opportunities for visitor use. The coordination of visitor services and interpretation could potentially increase tourism revenue.

Designation would have locally beneficial effects on the socioeconomic environment. Local communities would benefit from increased recognition and possibly greater understanding of cultural heritage, as well as from greater opportunities to interpret the trail.

Some communities could benefit from increased trail visitation through low to modest tourism expenditures as a result of trail programs, activities, and special events. Such benefits generally would be diffused along the length of the trail.

The effects on land values resulting from designation would be few and limited. Little land acquisition, if any, would be recommended. Restrictive language in the actual trail designation legislation, as has been done for other national historic trails, could limit federal land

acquisition to willing sellers only. Some landowners would benefit from the sale of lands and easements. It is possible that local municipalities would prohibit incompatible development that would adversely affect trail resources. Landowners and developers could be adversely affected by such actions of local governments. The owners of adjacent property might benefit from such land use actions.

Protected trail segments with recreational values might increase nearby residential property values. In some cases there could be a loss in property values because of visitor use on adjacent properties. Adverse impacts would be mitigated by involving affected landowners and other interests in the protection of the trail and the natural and cultural landscapes that are near the trail. Public access to private lands would be allowed only if there was an agreement with the landowner.

IMPACTS OF ALTERNATIVE 2

The designation of two national historic trails as El Camino Real de los Tejas and the Old San Antonio Road would provide for specific recognition and interpretation of the distinctively different themes of the overlapping routes. El Camino Real de los Tejas reflects the exploration, missionary activities, and settlement of northwest Louisiana and Texas as a colony of Spain. The Old San Antonio Road represents the westward migration and settlement of Texas by Anglo-Americans.

The management of two national historic trails, even with the same alignments as the single national historic trail proposed in alternative 1, would increase administrative and management costs. There might be increased opportunities for cooperative agreements with other public and private land managers and owners due to increased interest by particular trail constituencies that might have specific aspects of the routes. The designation of two overlapping routes would provide for the equal emphasis on the national significance of both trails.

Alternative 2 could lead to some confusion about the starting point of the Old San Antonio Road. Immigrants who used the trail came from the eastern United States. Many used the Natchez Trace to Natchez and then traveled on to Natchitoches, one of the many supply and collecting points along the Old San Antonio Road.

Cultural and Natural Resources

The level of resource protection provided by the designation of two national historic trails would be similar to that of alternative 1.

Socioeconomic Environment

The effects of alternative 2 on socioeconomic resources would be similar to those described for alternative 1.

IMPACTS OF ALTERNATIVE 3

Cultural and Natural Resources

Without designation as a national historic trail, the resources of the trail being studied would not receive overall coordination by a lead federal agency. State, local, and private entities would continue to manage trail-related resources as they do now. The absence of coordination and technical assistance by a federal agency would mean that protection would be afforded to fewer resources than would be protected by the designation of the trail as a national historic trail. Without designation, national recognition and increased awareness of the values of trail resources would be diminished, which also would mean less protection of resources. In addition, without the overall interpretive focus that would be provided with designation, fewer people living near the trail corridor and fewer people from throughout the nation would understand the significance and importance of El Camino Real de los Tejas.

It is likely that cultural resources could be destroyed inadvertently because less information would be available about the significance of these sites. There also would be less law enforcement and fewer volunteer activities to protect sites.

Socioeconomic Environment

There would be no significant change in the socioeconomic environment under alternative 3. State, local, and private trail activities would continue. Visitation and public use opportunities and coordination of tourism efforts would continue. Some activities and tourism opportunities might not occur because of the lack of designation, federal coordination, technical assistance, and opportunities for funding.

Some confusion and misunderstanding by residents and tourists would result from the absence of coordination of interpretive programs and the likelihood that there would continue to be different and sometimes widely varying interpretations of history. It is likely that there would be local designation of sites and segments that may not have been a part of El Camino Real. It is also likely that the identification and explanation of the effects of the conquest, settlement, and cultural exchanges would not necessarily be explained with the perspectives of different ethnic groups, including the descendants of indigenous people, hispanics, and others.